

Early African Art



14-1 • CROWNED HEAD OF A YORUBA RULER

From Ife, Nigeria. Yoruba, 12th–15th century CE. Zinc brass, height 9 $\frac{7}{16}$ " (24 cm). Museum of Ife Antiquities, Ife, Nigeria.

Early African Art

The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria regard the city of Ife (also known as Ile-Ife) as the “navel of the world,” the site of creation, the place where Ife’s first ruler—the *oni* Oduduwa—came down from heaven to create Earth and then to populate it. By the eleventh century CE, Ife was a lively metropolis, and, even today, every Yoruba city claims “descent” from Ife. It was, and remains, the sacred city of the Yoruba people.

A sculptural tradition of casting lifelike human heads, using the lost-wax process, began in Ife about 1050 CE and flourished over four centuries. Although the ancestral line of the Ife *oni* (king) has continued unbroken, knowledge of the precise purpose of these arresting works has been lost. The cast-bronze head in **FIGURE 14-1** demonstrates the extraordinary artistry that produced them. The modeling of the flesh—covered with thin, parallel **scarification** patterns (decorations made by scarring)—is remarkably sensitive, especially the subtle transitions around the nose and mouth. The full, delicate lips and expressive eyes bulge organically in ways that are strikingly similar to the faces of some modern Yoruba, underlining the sense of an individual likeness.

This head was cast with a crown, and its size and delicate features suggest it may represent a female *oni*. Although its precise use is not known, similar life-size heads have large holes in the neck, suggesting they may have been attached

to wooden figures, and mannequins with naturalistic facial features have been documented at memorial services for deceased individuals among contemporary Yoruba peoples. The Ife mannequin could have been dressed in the *oni*’s robes. But the head could also have been used to display an actual crown during annual purification and renewal rites.

The question of whether the Ife heads are true portraits has been debated, and their attention to the distinctive contours and features that provide individuality to human faces gives an impression that they could be. They all, however, seem to represent individuals of the same age and embody a similar concept of physical perfection, suggesting they are idealized images representing both physical beauty and moral character. As we have seen in the portraits of other cultures, however, idealization does not preclude the possibility that the faces describe the distinguishing characteristics of a specific human being.

The superb naturalism of Ife sculpture contradicted everything Europeans thought they knew about African art. The German scholar, Leo Frobenius, who “discovered” Ife sculpture in 1910 suggested that it was created not by Africans but by survivors from the legendary lost island of Atlantis. Later, there was speculation that influence from ancient Greece or Renaissance Europe must have reached Ife. Scientific study, however, finally put such prejudiced ideas to rest.

LEARN ABOUT IT

- 14.1** Compare the variety of figure styles used by the early artists of Africa and explore the relationship of style to technique, especially bronze casting.
- 14.2** Understand how African arts mediate and support communication between the temporal and the supernatural worlds of various spirit forces.
- 14.3** Explore how the arts of early Africa are fully realized and understood in the context of ritual and ceremony.
- 14.4** Recognize how contact with other cultures has affected the development and also threatened the very survival of early African art.

THE LURE OF ANCIENT AFRICA

“I descended [the Nile] with three hundred asses laden with incense, ebony, grain, panthers, ivory, and every good product.” Thus the Egyptian envoy Harkhuf described his return from Nubia, the African land to the south of Egypt, in 2300 BCE. The riches of Africa attracted merchants and envoys in ancient times, and trade brought the continent in contact with the rest of the world. Egyptian relations with the rest of the African continent continued through the Hellenistic era and beyond. Phoenicians and Greeks founded dozens of settlements along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa between 1000 and 300 BCE to extend trade routes across the Sahara to the peoples of Lake Chad and the bend of the Niger River (MAP 14-1). When the Romans took control of North Africa, they continued this lucrative trans-Saharan trade. In the seventh and eighth centuries CE, the expanding empire of Islam swept across North Africa, and thereafter Islamic merchants were regular visitors to Bilad al-Sudan (the Land of the Blacks—sub-Saharan Africa). Islamic scholars chronicled the great West African empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, and West African gold financed the flowering of Islamic culture.

East Africa, meanwhile, had been drawn since at least the beginning of the Common Era into the maritime trade that ringed the Indian Ocean and extended east to Indonesia and the South China Sea. Arab, Indian, and Persian ships plied the coastline. A new language, Swahili, evolved from centuries of contact between Arabic-speaking merchants and Bantu-speaking Africans, and great port cities such as Kilwa, Mombasa, and Mogadishu arose.

In the fifteenth century, Europeans ventured by ship into the Atlantic Ocean and down the coast of Africa. Finally encountering the continent firsthand, they were often astonished by what they found (see “The Myth of ‘Primitive’ Art,” page 412). “Dear King My Brother,” wrote a fifteenth-century Portuguese king to his new trading partner, the king of Benin in west Africa. The Portuguese king’s respect was well founded—Benin was vastly more powerful and wealthier than the small European country that had just stumbled upon it.

As we saw in Chapter 3, Africa was home to one of the world’s earliest great civilizations, that of ancient Egypt, and as we saw in Chapter 9, Egypt and the rest of North Africa contributed prominently to the development of Islamic art and culture. This chapter examines the artistic legacy elsewhere in ancient Africa.

AFRICA—THE CRADLE OF ART AND CIVILIZATION

During the twentieth century, the sculpture of traditional African societies—wood carvings of astonishing formal inventiveness and power—found admirers the world over. While avidly collected, these works were much misunderstood. For the past 75 years, art historians and cultural anthropologists have studied African art firsthand, which has added to our overall understanding

of art making in many African cultures. However, except for a few isolated examples (such as in Nigeria and Mali), the historical depth of our understanding is still limited by the continuing lack of systematic archaeological research. Our understanding of traditions that are more than 100 years old is especially hampered by the fact that most African art was made from wood, which decays rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, few examples of African masks and sculpture remain from before the nineteenth century, and for the most part it is necessary to rely on contemporary traditions and oral histories to help extrapolate backward in time to determine what may have been the types, styles, and meanings of art made in the past. Nevertheless, the few surviving ancient African artworks—in such durable materials as terra cotta, stone, and bronze, and an extensive record in rock art that has been preserved in sheltered places—bear eloquent witness to the skill of early African artists and the splendor of the civilizations in which they worked.

Twentieth-century archaeology has made it popular to speak of Africa as the cradle of human civilization. Certainly the earliest evidence for our human ancestors comes from southern Africa (see “Southern African Rock Art,” page 414). Now evidence of the initial stirrings of artistic activity also comes from this region. Recently, quantities of ochre pigment thought to have been used for ceremonial or decorative purposes, and perforated shells thought to have been fashioned into beads and worn as personal adornment, have been found in Blombos Cave on the Indian Ocean coast of South Africa, dating to approximately 77,000 years ago. Also discovered together with these were two small, ochre blocks that had been smoothed and then decorated with geometric arrays of carved lines (see FIG. 1-4). These incised abstract patterns pre-date any other findings of ancient art by more than 30,000 years, and they suggest a far earlier development of modern human behavior than had been previously recognized.

The earliest-known figurative artworks from the African continent are animal figures dating to about 25,000 BCE, painted in red and black pigment on flat stones found in a cave designated as Apollo 11, located in the desert mountains of Namibia. These figures are comparable to the better-known European cave drawings such as those from the Chauvet Cave (c. 32,000–30,000 BCE) and Lascaux Cave (c. 15,000–13,000 BCE) discussed in Chapter 1.

AFRICAN ROCK ART

Like the Paleolithic inhabitants of Europe, early Africans painted and inscribed images on the walls of caves and rock shelters. Rock art is found throughout the African continent in places where the environment has been conducive to preservation—areas ranging from small, isolated shelters to great cavernous formations. Distinct geographic zones of rock art can be identified broadly, encompassing the northern, central, southern, and eastern regions of the continent. These rock paintings and engravings range in form from highly abstract geometric designs to abstract and naturalistic



MAP 14-1 • ANCIENT AFRICA

Nearly 5,000 miles from north to south, Africa is the second-largest continent and was the home of some of the earliest and most advanced cultures of the ancient world.

representations of human and animal forms, including hunting scenes, scenes of domestic life, and costumed figures that appear to be dancing. The long record of rock art, extending over thousands of years in numerous places, charts dramatic environmental and social change in the deserts of Africa. Images depicting human subjects are also important evidence that the African artistic traditions of body decoration, mask making and performance spring from ancient African roots.

SAHARAN ROCK ART

The mountains of the central Sahara—principally the Tassili-n-Ajjer range in the south of present-day Algeria and the Acacus Mountains in present-day Libya—contain images that span a period of thousands of years. They record not only the artistic and cultural development of the peoples who lived in the region, but

also the transformation of the Sahara from a fertile grassland to the vast desert we know today.

The earliest Saharan rock art is thought to date from at least 8000 BCE, during the transition into a geological period known as the Makalian Wet Phase. At that time the Sahara was a grassy plain, perhaps much like the game-park reserves of modern east Africa. Vivid images of hippopotamuses, elephants, giraffes, antelopes, and other animals incised on rock surfaces attest to the abundant wildlife that roamed the region.

A variety of scenes found on rock walls in both southern Algeria and Libya depict men and women dancing or performing various ceremonial activities. The artists who created these works paid close attention to details of clothing, body decoration, and headdresses; in some examples the figures are depicted wearing masks that cover their faces. It is suggested that they are engaged in

The word “primitive” was once used by Western art historians to categorize the art of Africa, the art of the Pacific islands, and the indigenous art of the Americas. The term itself means “early” or “first of its kind,” but its use was meant to imply that these cultures were crude, simple, backward, and stuck in an early stage of development.

This attitude was accepted by Christian missionaries and explorers, who often described the peoples among whom they worked as “heathen,” “barbaric,” “ignorant,” “tribal,” “primitive,” and other terms rooted in racism and colonialism. Such usages were extended to these peoples’ creations, and “primitive art” became the conventional label for their cultural products.

Criteria that have been used to label a people “primitive” include the use of so-called Stone Age technology, the absence of written histories, and the failure to build great cities. Even based on these criteria, however, the accomplishments of the peoples of Africa, to take just one example, contradict such prejudiced condescension: Africans south of the Sahara have smelted and forged iron since at least 500 BCE. Africans in many areas made and used high-quality steel for weapons and tools. Many African peoples have recorded their histories in Arabic since at least the tenth century CE. The first European visitors to Africa admired the style and sophistication of urban centers such as Benin

and Luanda, to name only two of the continent’s great cities. Clearly, neither the cultures of ancient Africa nor the artworks they produced were “primitive.”

Until quite recently, Westerners tended to see Africa as a single country and not as an immense continent of vastly diverse cultures. Moreover, they perceived artists working in Africa as craftsmakers bound to styles and images dictated by village elders and producing art that was anonymous and interchangeable. Over the past several decades, however, these misconceptions, too, have crumbled. Art historians and anthropologists have now identified numerous African cultures and artists and compiled catalogs of their work. For example, the well-known Yoruba artist Olowe of Ise (see Chapter 29) was commissioned by rulers throughout the Yoruba region in the early twentieth century to create prestige objects such as palace veranda posts and palace doors or *tour-de-force* carvings such as magnificent lidded bowls supported by kneeling figures. Certainly we will never know the names of the vast majority of African artists of the past, just as we do not know the names of the sculptors responsible for the portrait busts of ancient Rome or the monumental reliefs of the Hindu temples of South Asia. But, as elsewhere, the greatest artists in Africa were famous and sought after, while innumerable others labored honorably and not at all anonymously.

rituals intended to ensure adequate rainfall or success in hunting, or to honor their dead. Produced in a variety of styles, these images document the development of the complex ceremonial and ritual lives of the people who created them (FIG. 14-2).

By 4000 BCE the climate had become more arid, and hunting had given way to herding as the primary life-sustaining activity of the Sahara’s inhabitants. Among the most beautiful and complex examples of Saharan rock art created in this period are scenes of sheep, goats, and cattle and of the daily lives of the people who tended them. Some scenes found at Tassili-n-Ajjer date from late in the herding period, about 5000–2000 BCE, and illustrate men and women gathered in front of round, thatched houses. As the men tend cattle, the women prepare a meal and care for children. Some scenes attempt to create a sense of depth and distance with overlapping forms, and the placement of near figures lower and distant figures higher in the picture plane.

By 2500–2000 BCE the Sahara was drying and the great game had disappeared, but other animals appear in the rock art. The horse was brought from Egypt by about 1500 BCE and is seen regularly in rock art over the ensuing millennia. The fifth-century BCE Greek historian Herodotus described a chariot-driving people called the Garamante, whose kingdom corresponds roughly to present-day Libya. Rock-art images of horse-drawn chariots bear out his account. Around 600 BCE the camel was introduced into the region from the east, and images of camels were painted on and incised into the rock.

The drying of the Sahara coincided with the rise of Egyptian civilization along the Nile Valley to the east. Similarities can be

noted between Egyptian and Saharan motifs, among them images of rams with what appear to be disks between their horns. These similarities have been interpreted as evidence of Egyptian influence on the less-developed regions of the Sahara. Yet in light of the great age of Saharan rock art, it seems just as plausible that the influence flowed the other way, carried by people who had migrated into the Nile Valley when the grasslands of the Sahara disappeared.

SUB-SAHARAN CIVILIZATIONS

Saharan peoples presumably migrated southward as well, into the Sudan, the broad belt of grassland that stretches across Africa south of the Sahara Desert. They brought with them knowledge of settled agriculture and animal husbandry. The earliest evidence of settled agriculture in the Sudan dates from about 3000 BCE. Toward the middle of the first millennium BCE, at the same time that iron technology was being developed elsewhere in Africa, knowledge of ironworking spread across the Sudan as well, enabling its inhabitants to create more effective weapons and farming tools. In the wake of these developments, larger and more complex societies emerged, especially in the fertile basins of Lake Chad in the central Sudan and the Niger and Senegal rivers to the west.

NOK

Some of the earliest evidence of iron technology in sub-Saharan Africa comes from the so-called Nok culture, which arose in the western Sudan, in present-day Nigeria, as early as 500 BCE. The



14-2 • DANCERS IN CEREMONIAL ATTIRE

Section of rock-wall painting, Tassili-n-Ajjer, Algeria. c. 5000–2000 BCE.

Nok people were farmers who grew grain and oil-bearing seeds, but they were also smelters with the technology for refining ore. Slag and the remains of furnaces have been discovered, along with clay nozzles from the bellows used to fan the fires. The Nok people created the earliest-known sculpture of sub-Saharan Africa, producing accomplished terra-cotta figures of human and animal subjects between about 500 BCE and 200 CE.

Nok sculpture was discovered in modern times by tin miners digging in alluvial deposits on the Jos plateau north of the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers. Presumably, floods from centuries past had removed the sculptures from their original contexts, dragged and rolled them along, and then deposited them, scratched and broken, often leaving only the heads from what must have been complete human figures. Following archaeological convention, the name of a nearby village, Nok, was given to the culture that created these works. Nok-style works of sculpture

14-3 • HEAD

From Nok, Nigeria. c. 500 BCE–200 CE. Terra cotta, height 14 $\frac{9}{16}$ " (36 cm). National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria.



have since been found in numerous sites over a wide area.

The Nok **HEAD** in **FIGURE 14-3**, slightly larger than life-size, probably formed part of a complete figure. The triangular or D-shaped eyes are characteristic of Nok style and appear also on sculptures of animals. Holes in the pupils, nostrils, and mouth allowed air to pass freely as the figure was fired. Each of the large buns of its elaborate hairstyle is pierced with a hole that may have held ornamental feathers. Other Nok figures were created displaying beaded necklaces, armlets, bracelets, anklets, and other prestige ornaments. Nok sculpture may represent ordinary people dressed for special occasions or it may portray people of high status, thus reflecting social stratification in this early farming culture. In either case, the sculpture provides evidence of considerable technical accomplishment, which has led to speculation that Nok culture was built on the achievements of an earlier culture still to be discovered.

Rock painting (pictographs) and engraving (petroglyphs) from sites in southern Africa differ in style and date from those discussed for the Sahara region. Some works of art pre-date those found in the Sahara, while others continued to be produced into the modern era. Early works include an engraved fragment found in datable debris in Wonderwerk Cave, South Africa, which is about 10,000 years old. Painted stone flakes found at a site in Zimbabwe suggest dates between 13,000 and 8000 BCE.

Numerous examples of rock painting are also found in eastern South Africa in the region of the Drakensberg Mountains. Almost 600 sites have been located in rock shelters and caves, with approximately 35,000 individual images catalogued. It is believed the paintings

were produced, beginning approximately 2,400 years ago, by the predecessors of San peoples. Ethnographic research among the San and related peoples in southern Africa suggest possible interpretations for some of the paintings. For example, rock paintings depicting groups of dancing figures may relate to certain forms of San rituals that are still performed today to heal individuals or to cleanse communities. These may have been created by San ritual specialists or shamans to record their curing dances or trance experiences of the spirit world. San rock artists continued to create rock paintings into the late nineteenth century. These latter works depict the arrival of Afrikaner pioneers in the region as well as British soldiers brandishing guns used to hunt eland (**FIG. 14-4**).



14-4 • SECTION OF SAN ROCK-WALL PAINTING
San peoples, uncertain dates. Drakensberg Mountains, South Africa. Pigment and eland blood on rock.

IGBO-UKWU

A number of significant sites excavated in Nigeria in the mid twentieth century increase our understanding of the development of art and culture in west Africa. This includes the archaeological site of Igbo-Ukwu in eastern Nigeria where Igbo peoples reside, numerically one of Nigeria's largest populations. The earliest-known evidence for copper alloy or bronze casting in sub-Saharan Africa is found at Igbo-Ukwu. This evidence dates to the ninth and tenth centuries CE. Igbo-Ukwu is also the earliest-known site containing an elite burial and shrine complex yet found in sub-Saharan Africa. Three distinct archaeological sites have been excavated at Igbo-Ukwu—one containing a burial chamber, another resembling a shrine or storehouse containing ceremonial objects, and the third an ancient pit containing ceremonial and prestige objects.

The **BURIAL CHAMBER** (**FIG. 14-5**) contained an individual dressed in elaborate regalia, placed in a seated position, and surrounded by emblems of his power and authority. These included

three ivory tusks, thousands of imported beads that originally formed part of an elaborate necklace, other adornments, and a cast-bronze representation of a leopard skull. Elephants and leopards remain symbols of temporal and spiritual leadership in Africa today. Ethnographic research among the Nri, an Igbo-related people currently residing in the region, suggests that the burial site is that of an important Nri king or ritual leader (*eze*).

The second excavation uncovered a shrine or storehouse complex containing ceremonial and prestige objects. These copper-alloy castings were made by the lost-wax technique (see “Lost-Wax Casting,” page 418) in the form of elaborately decorated small bowls, fly-whisk handles, altar stands, staff finials (decorative tops), and ornaments. Igbo-Ukwu's unique style consists of the representation in bronze of natural objects such as gourd bowls and snail shells whose entire outer surface is covered with elaborate raised and banded decorations—including linear, spiral, circular, and granular designs, sometimes with the addition of small animals



14-5 • BURIAL CHAMBER

Igbo-Ukwu, Nigeria. Reconstruction showing the placement of the ruler and artifacts in the chamber in the 10th century. Painting by Caroline Sassoon.

or insects such as snakes, frogs, crickets, or flies applied to the decorated surface. Some castings are further enlivened with the addition of brightly colored beads.

A cast fly-whisk handle is topped with the representation of an equestrian figure whose face, like that of a pendant head also found during excavation, is scarified with patterning similar to that found on some of the terra-cotta and bronze heads of rulers at Ife. These markings resemble those called *ichi*, which are still used by Igbo men as a symbol of high achievement. Among the most technically sophisticated bronze castings found at Igbo-Ukwu is a roped vessel (see “A Closer Look,” page 416) resembling a form of water-pot drum still used in this region of Nigeria. The vessel is filled with water and a flat mallet is struck across the surface of the water at the rim to create a percussive sound.

IFE

The sculpture created by the artists of the city of Ife are among the most remarkable works in the history of art. Ancient Ife, which arose in the southwestern, forested part of Nigeria about 800 CE, was essentially circular in plan, with the *oni*'s palace at the center. Ringed by protective stone walls and moats, it was connected to other Yoruba cities by roads that radiated from the center, passing through the city walls at fortified gateways and decorated with mosaics created from stones and pottery shards. From these elaborately patterned pavement mosaics, which covered much of Ife's open spaces, comes the name for Ife's most artistically cohesive historical period (c. 1000–1400), the Pavement period.

Just as the *oni*'s palace was located in a large courtyard in the center of Ife, so too were ritual spaces elsewhere in Ife located in paved courtyards with altars. In the center of such a sacred courtyard, outlined by rings of pavement mosaic, archaeologists excavated an exceptional terra-cotta vessel (FIG. 14-6). The jar's bottom had been ritually broken before it was buried, so that liquid offerings (libations) poured into the neck opening would flow into the



14-6 • RITUAL VESSEL

From Ife, Nigeria. Yoruba, 13th–14th century CE. Terra cotta, height 9¹⁹/₁₆" (24.9 cm). University Art Museum, Obafemi, Awolowo University, Ife, Nigeria.

A CLOSER LOOK | Roped Pot on a Stand

From Igbo-Ukwu. 9th–10th century CE.

Leaded bronze, height 12¹¹/₁₆" (32.3 cm). National Museum, Lagos.

Like a number of other objects excavated at Igbo-Ukwu, this vessel is a *skeuomorph*—an object created in a different material from the original but made to resemble the original in form, shape, and texture.


The knotted rope cage appears to be made from one continuous piece of “rope.” Even the individual strands of the “rope” are replicated in leaded bronze.

Pot stands are used to support containers placed on sacred altars so that the water contained in the vessels will never touch the ground before its use in ritual ceremony.



The flaring neck of the vessel just below the rim and the lower half of the pot stand were both cast separately. Molten metal was then applied to the edges of the separate castings to join them together.

The rope cage surrounding the pot and stand was cast separately and then positioned around the pot and upper part of the stand. The lower part of the knotted rope was then bent inward to grip the pot stand.

 [View the Closer Look for the roped pot on a stand on myartslab.com](#)

earth. The objects depicted in relief on the surface of the vessel include what looks like an altar platform with three heads under it, the outer two quite abstract and the middle one in the naturalistic tradition of free-standing Yoruba portrait heads. The abstraction of the two outside heads may have been a way of honoring or blessing the central portrait, a practice that survives among Yoruba royalty today.

BENIN

Ifé was probably the artistic parent of the great city-state of Benin, which arose 150 miles to the southeast. According to oral histories, the earliest kings of Benin belonged to the Ogiso, or Skyking, dynasty. After a long period of misrule, however, the people of

Benin asked the *oni* of Ifé for a new ruler, and the *oni* sent Prince Oranmiyan, who founded a new dynasty in 1170. Some two centuries later, the fourth king, or *oba*, of Benin sent to Ifé for a master metalcaster named Iguegha to start a tradition of memorial sculpture like that of Ifé, and this tradition of casting memorial heads for the shrines of royal ancestors endures among the successors of Oranmiyan to this day (FIG. 14-7).

Benin established cordial relations with Portugal in 1485 and carried on an active trade, at first in ivory and forest products, but eventually in slaves. Benin flourished until 1897, when, in reprisal for the massacre of a party of trade negotiators, British troops sacked and burned the royal palace, sending the *oba* into an exile from which he did not return until 1914 (see Chapter 29).

14-7 • MEMORIAL HEAD OF AN OBA

From Benin, Nigeria. Early Period, c. 16th century CE. Brass, height 9" (23 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Trust through the generosity of Donald J. and Adele C. Hall, Mr. and Mrs. Herman Robert Sutherland, an anonymous donor, and the exchange of Nelson Gallery Foundation properties (87-7)

This belongs to a small group of rare Early Period sculptures called "rolled-collar" heads that are distinguished by the rolled collar that serves as a firm base for the exquisitely rendered head.

The palace was later rebuilt, and the present-day *oba* continues the dynasty started by Oranmiyan.

The British invaders discovered shrines to deceased *obas* covered with brass heads, bells, and figures. They also found wooden rattles and enormous ivory tusks carved with images of kings, court attendants, and sixteenth-century Portuguese soldiers. The British appropriated the treasure as war booty, making no effort to note which head came from which shrine, thus destroying evidence that would have helped establish the relative age of the heads and determine a chronology for the evolution of Benin style. Nevertheless, it has been possible to piece together a chronology from other evidence.

The Benin heads, together with other objects, were originally placed on a semicircular platform or **ALTAR** and surmounted by large elephant tusks, another symbol of power (FIG. 14-8). Benin brass heads range from small, thinly cast, and lifelike to large, thickly cast, and highly stylized. Many scholars have concluded



14-8 • PHOTOGRAPH OF AN ALTAR

Edo culture, Nigeria.
c. 1959. The National
Museum of African Art,
Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC. Eliot
Elisofon Photographic
Archives (7584)

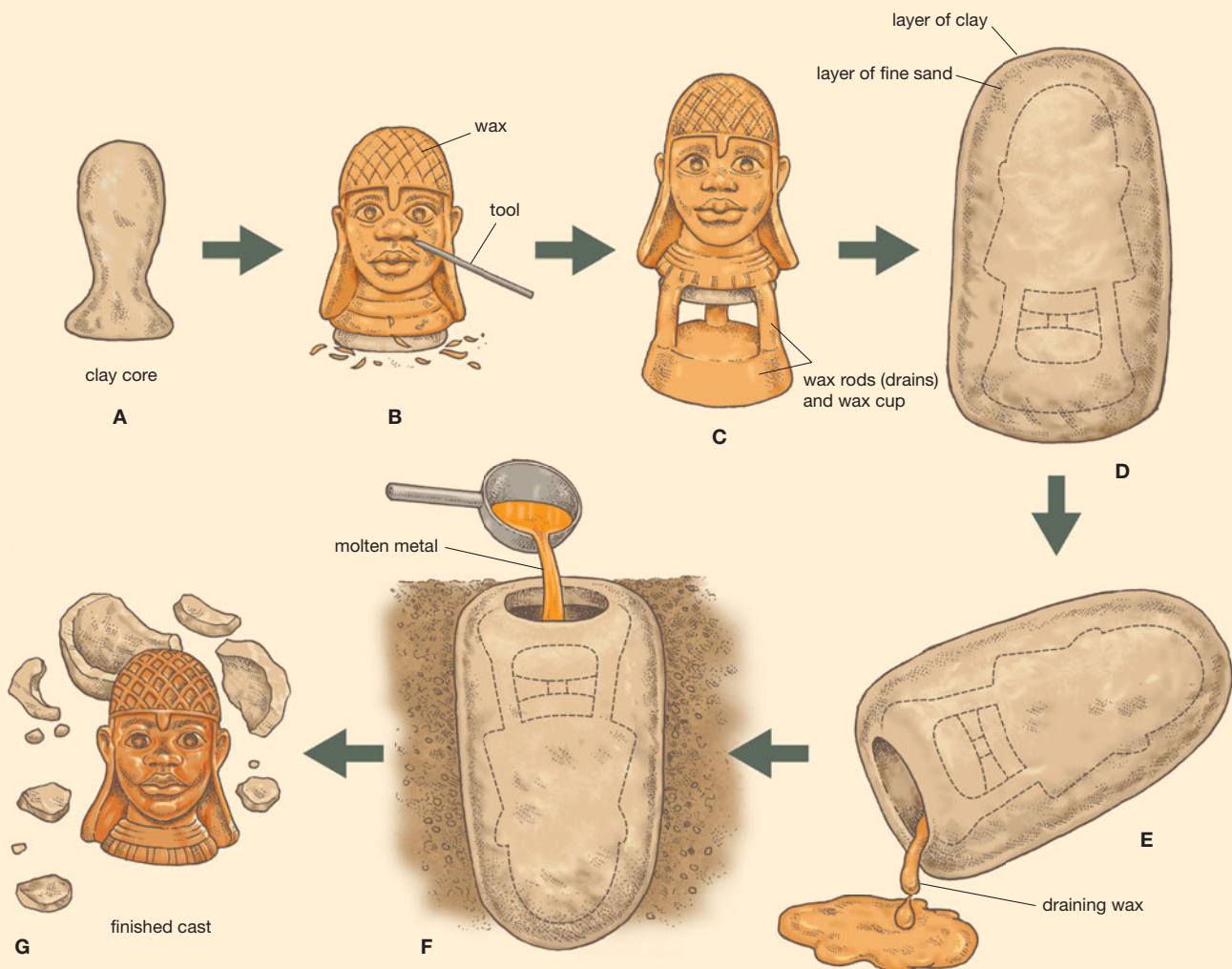


TECHNIQUE | Lost-Wax Casting

In the lost-wax casting process a metal copy is produced from an original image made of wax. The usual metals for this casting process are bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, and brass, an alloy of copper and zinc. First, the sculptor models a wax original. Then the wax is invested in a heat-resistant mold, usually of clay. Next, the wax is melted, leaving an empty cavity into which molten metal is poured. After the metal cools and solidifies, the mold is broken away and the metal copy is chased and polished.

The progression of drawings here shows the steps used by the Benin sculptors of Africa. A heat-resistant “core” of clay (A) approximating the shape of the sculpture-to-be (and eventually becoming the hollow inside the sculpture) was covered by a layer of wax that had the thickness of

the final sculpture. The sculptor carved or modeled (B) the details in the wax. Rods and a pouring cup made of wax were attached (C) to the model. A thin layer of fine, damp sand was pressed very firmly into the surface of the wax model, and then model, rods, and cup were encased (D) in thick layers of clay. When the clay was completely dry, the mold was heated (E) to melt out the wax. The mold was then placed upside down in the ground to receive (F) the molten metal. When the metal was completely cool, the outside clay cast and the inside core were broken up and removed (G), leaving the cast-brass sculpture. Details were polished to finish the piece, which could not be duplicated because the mold had been destroyed.



Watch a video about the process of lost-wax casting on myartslab.com

that the smallest, most naturalistic heads with only a few strands of beads around the neck were created during a so-called Early Period (1400–1550), when Benin artists were still heavily influenced by Ife. Heads grew heavier and increasingly stylized, and the strands of beads increased in number until they concealed the chin

during the Middle Period (1550–1700). Heads from the ensuing Late Period (1700–1897) are very large and heavy, with angular, stylized features, elaborate beaded crowns, and numerous necklaces forming a tall, cylindrical mass. In addition, broad, horizontal flanges, or projecting edges, bearing small images cast in low relief



14-9 • HIP PENDANT REPRESENTING AN IYOKA (“QUEEN MOTHER”)

From Benin City, Nigeria. Middle Period, c. 1550 CE. Ivory, iron, and copper, height 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (23.4 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller (1978.412.323)

ring the base of the Late Period heads. The increase in size and weight of Benin memorial heads over time may reflect the growing power and wealth flowing to the *oba* from Benin’s expanding trade with Europe.

At Benin, as in many other African cultures, the head is the symbolic center of a person’s intelligence, wisdom, and ability to succeed in this world or to communicate with spiritual forces in the ancestral world. One of the honorifics used for the king is “Great Head”: The head leads the body as the king leads the people. All memorial heads include representations of coral-beaded caps and necklaces and royal costume. Coral, enclosing the head and displayed on the body, is still the ultimate symbol of the *oba*’s power and authority.

The art of Benin is a royal art; only the *oba* could commission works in brass (see “A Warrior Chief Pledging Loyalty,” page 420). Artisans who served the court were organized into **guilds** and lived in a separate quarter of the city. *Obas* also commissioned important works in ivory. One example is a beautiful ornamental pendant (**FIG. 14-9**) representing an *iyoba* (queen mother—the *oba*’s mother), the senior female member of the royal court. The pendant was carved as a belt ornament and was worn at the *oba*’s hip. Its pupils were originally inlaid with iron, as were the scarification patterns on the forehead. This particular belt ornament may represent Idia, who was the mother of Esigie, a powerful *oba* who ruled from 1504 to 1550. Idia is particularly remembered for raising an army and using magical powers to help her son defeat his enemies. Like Idia, the Portuguese helped Esigie expand his kingdom. The necklace represents heads of Portuguese soldiers with beards and flowing hair. In the crown, more Portuguese heads alternate with figures of mudfish, which symbolize Olokun, the Lord of the Great Waters. Mudfish live near river banks, mediating between water and land, just as the *oba*, who is viewed as semi-divine, mediates between the human world and the supernatural world of Olokun.

OTHER URBAN CENTERS

Ife and Benin were only two of the many cities that arose in ancient Africa. The first European visitors to the west African coast at the end of the fifteenth century were impressed not only by Benin, but also by the city of Mbanza Kongo, south of the mouth of the Congo River. Along the east African coastline, Europeans also happened upon cosmopolitan cities that had been busily carrying on long-distance trade across the Indian Ocean and as far away as China and Indonesia for hundreds of years.

Important centers also existed in the interior, especially across the central and western Sudan. There, cities and the states that developed around them grew wealthy from the trans-Saharan trade that had linked west Africa to the Mediterranean since at least the first millennium BCE. Indeed, the routes across the desert were probably as old as the desert itself. Among the most significant goods exchanged in this trade were salt from the north and gold from west Africa. Such fabled cities as Mopti, Timbuktu, and Jenné arose in the vast area of grasslands along the Niger River in the region known as the Niger Bend (present-day Mali), a trading crossroads as early as the first century BCE. They were great centers of commerce, where merchants from all over west Africa met caravans arriving from the Mediterranean. Eventually the trading networks extended across Africa from the Sudan in the east to the Atlantic coast in the west. In the twelfth century CE a Mande-speaking people formed the kingdom of Mali (Manden). The rulers adopted Islam, and by the fourteenth century they controlled the oases on which the traders’ caravans depended. Mali prospered, and wealthy cities like Timbuktu and Jenné became famed as centers of Islamic learning.

A BROADER LOOK | A Warrior Chief Pledging Loyalty

Produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, approximately 900 brass plaques, each averaging about 16 to 18 inches in height, once decorated the walls and pillars of the royal palace of the kingdom of Benin. Like the brass memorial heads and figure sculpture, the plaques were made using the lost-wax casting process. They illustrate a variety of subjects including ceremonial scenes at court, showing the *oba*, other court functionaries, and (at times) Portuguese soldiers. Modeled in relief,

the plaques depict one or more figures, with precise details of costume and regalia. Some figures are modeled in such high relief that they appear almost free-standing as they emerge from a textured surface background that often includes foliate patterning.

This **PLAQUE (FIG. 14-10)** features a warrior chief in ceremonial attire. His rank is indicated by a necklace of leopard's teeth and a coral-decorated cap and collar. He also wears an elaborate skirt with a leopard mask

on his hip and holds a spear in one hand and an *eben* sword raised above his head in the other hand. The *eben* sword, with its distinctive leaf-shaped blade made of iron with openwork surface decoration is a principal symbol of high rank in Benin City even today (**FIGS. 14-11, 14-12**).

The plaque is organized in a hierarchal order with the warrior chief larger in size and in the center of the composition. The chief is flanked by two warriors holding shields and



14-10 • PLAQUE: WARRIOR CHIEF FLANKED BY WARRIORS AND ATTENDANTS

From Benin City, Nigeria. Middle Period, c. 1550–1650 CE. Brass, height 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (37.5 \times 39.4 cm).

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust (58-3)



14-11 • SENIOR TOWN CHIEF

Supported by two attendants, one of them carrying his *eben* sword.

spears, and two smaller figures representing court attendants. One attendant plays a side-blown horn that announces the warrior chief's presence, while the other attendant carries a ceremonial box for conveying gifts to the *oba*. The scene is a ceremony of obeisance to the *oba*, and the warrior chief's gesture of raising the *eben* sword is still performed at annual ceremonies in which chiefs declare their allegiance and loyalty to the *oba* by raising the sword and spinning it in the air to add drama, conviction, and authority to the ceremony.

14-12 • OBA EREDIAUWA

Wearing coral-beaded regalia and seated on a dais.



At a site near Jenné known as Jenné-Jeno or Old Jenné, excavations (by both archaeologists and looters) have uncovered hundreds of terra-cotta figures dating from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. The figures were polished, covered with a red clay slip, and fired at a low temperature. A **HORSEMAN**, armed with quiver, arrows, and a dagger, is a good example of the technique (**FIG. 14-13**). Man and horse are formed of rolls of clay on which details of the face, clothing, and harness are carved, engraved, and painted. The rider has a long oval head and jutting chin, pointed oval eyes set in multiple framing lids, and a long straight nose. He wears short pants and a helmet with a chin strap, and his horse has an ornate bridle. Such elaborate trappings suggest that the horseman could be a guardian figure, hero, or even a deified ancestor. Similar figures have been found in sanctuaries. But, as urban life declined, so did the arts. The long tradition of ceramic sculpture came to an end in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when rivals began to raid the Manden cities.

JENNÉ

In 1655, the Islamic writer al-Sadi wrote this description of Jenné:

This city is large, flourishing, and prosperous; it is rich, blessed, and favoured by the Almighty.... Jenne [Jenné] is one of the great markets of the Muslim world. There one meets the salt merchants from the mines of Teghaza and merchants carrying gold from the mines of Bitou.... Because of this blessed city, caravans flock to Timbuktu from all points of the horizon.... The area around Jenne is fertile and well populated; with numerous markets held there on all the days of the week. It is certain that it contains 7,077 villages very near to one another.

(Translated by Graham Connah in *African Civilizations*, page 108)

By the time al-Sadi wrote his account, Jenné already had a long history. Archaeologists have determined that the city was established by the third century CE, and that by the middle of the ninth century it had become a major urban center. Also by the ninth century, Islam was becoming an economic and religious force in west and north Africa, and the northern terminals of the trans-Saharan trade routes had already been incorporated into the Islamic realm.

When Koi Konboro, the 26th king of Jenné, converted to Islam in the thirteenth century, he transformed his palace into the first of three successive mosques in the city. Like the two that followed, the first mosque was built of adobe brick, a sun-dried mixture of clay and straw. With its great surrounding wall and tall towers, it was said to have been more beautiful and more lavishly decorated than the Kaaba, the central shrine of Islam, at Mecca. The mosque eventually attracted the attention of austere Muslim rulers who objected to its sumptuous furnishings. Among these was the early nineteenth-century ruler Sekou Amadou, who had it razed and a far more humble structure erected on a new site. This



14-13 • HORSEMAN

From Old Jenné, Mali. 13th–15th century CE. Terra cotta, height 27¾" (70.5 cm). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Museum Purchase (86-12-2)

second mosque was in turn replaced by the current grand mosque, constructed between 1906 and 1907 on the ancient site in the style of the original. The reconstruction was supervised by the architect Ismaila Traoré, the head of the Jenné guild of masons.

The mosque's eastern, or "marketplace," façade boasts three tall towers, the center one containing the *mihrab* (**FIG. 14-14**). The finials, or crowning ornaments, at the top of each tower bear ostrich eggs, symbols of fertility and purity. The façade and sides of the mosque are distinguished by tall, narrow, engaged columns, which act as buttresses. These columns are characteristic of west African mosque architecture, and their cumulative rhythmic effect is one of great verticality and grandeur. The most unusual features of west African mosques are the **torons**, wooden beams projecting from the walls. Torons provide permanent supports for the scaffolding erected each year so that the exterior can be replastered.


Traditional houses resemble the mosque on a small scale. Adobe walls, reinforced by buttresses, rise above the roofline in conical turrets, emphasizing the entrance. Rooms open inward onto a courtyard. Extended upper walls mask a flat roof terrace that gives more private space for work and living.



14-14 • GREAT FRIDAY MOSQUE

Jenné, Mali. Showing the eastern and northern façades. Rebuilding of 1907, in the style of 13th-century original.

The plan of the mosque is not quite rectangular. Inside, nine rows of heavy adobe columns, 33' (10 m) tall and linked by pointed arches, support a flat ceiling of palm logs. An open courtyard on the west side (not seen here) is enclosed by a great double wall only slightly lower than the walls of the mosque itself. The main entrances to the prayer hall are in the north wall (to the right in the photograph).

 **Watch** an architectural simulation explaining adobe-brick construction on myartslab.com

GREAT ZIMBABWE

Thousands of miles from Jenné, in southeastern Africa, an extensive trade network developed along the Zambezi, Limpopo, and Sabi rivers. Its purpose was to funnel gold, ivory, and exotic skins to the coastal trading towns that had been built by Arabs and Swahili-speaking Africans. There, the gold and ivory were exchanged for prestige goods, including porcelain, beads, and other manufactured items. Between 1000 and 1500 CE, this trade was largely controlled from a site that was called Great Zimbabwe, home of the Shona people.

The word *zimbabwe* derives from the Shona term *dzimba dza mabwe* (“venerated houses” or “houses of stone”). The stone buildings at Great Zimbabwe were constructed by the ancestors of the present-day people of this region. The earliest construction at the site took advantage of the enormous boulders abundant in the vicinity. Masons incorporated the boulders and used the uniform granite blocks that split naturally from them to build a series of tall enclosing walls high on a hilltop. Each enclosure defined a family’s living space and housed dwellings made of adobe with conical, thatched roofs.

The largest building complex at Great Zimbabwe is located in a broad valley below the hilltop enclosures. Known as Imba Huru (the Great Enclosure), the complex is ringed by a masonry wall more than 800 feet long, up to 32 feet tall, and 17 feet thick at the base. Inside the great outer wall are numerous smaller stone enclosures and adobe platforms (**FIG. 14-15**). The buildings at Great Zimbabwe were built without mortar; for stability the walls are battered, or built so that they slope inward toward the top. Although some of the enclosures at Great Zimbabwe were built on hilltops, there is no evidence that they were constructed as fortresses. There are neither openings for weapons to be thrust through, nor battlements for warriors to stand on. Instead, the walls and structures seem intended to reflect the wealth and power of the city’s rulers. The Imba Huru was probably a royal residence, or palace complex, and other structures housed members of the ruler’s family and court. The complex formed the nucleus of a city that radiated for almost a mile in all directions. Over the centuries, the builders grew more skillful, and the later additions are distinguished by dressed, or smoothly finished, stones, laid in fine, even, level courses. One of these later additions is a structure known



14-15 • DRAWING OF GREAT ENCLOSURE, GREAT ZIMBABWE

14-16 • CONICAL TOWER, GREAT ENCLOSURE

Great Zimbabwe Shona, Zimbabwe. c. 1350–1450 CE. Stone, height of tower 30' (9.1 m).

simply as the **CONICAL TOWER** (FIG. 14-16), 18 feet in diameter, 30 feet tall, and originally capped with three courses of ornamental stonework. Constructed between the two walls and resembling a granary, it may have represented the good harvest and prosperity believed to result from allegiance to the ruler of Great Zimbabwe.

It is estimated that at the height of its power, in the fourteenth century, Great Zimbabwe and its surrounding city housed a population of more than 10,000 people. A large cache of goods containing items of such far-flung origin as Portuguese medallions, Persian pottery, and Chinese porcelain testify to the extent of its trade. Yet beginning in the mid fifteenth century Great Zimbabwe was gradually abandoned as control of the lucrative southeast African trade network passed to the Mwene Mutapa and Khami empires a short distance away.

AKSUM AND LALIBELA

In the second century BCE Aksumite civilization increased in importance in the Ethiopian highlands through the control of trade routes from the African interior to the Red Sea port of Adulis. Its exports included ivory, gold, slaves, frankincense, myrrh, and salt. In the mid fourth century CE the Aksumite king Ezana converted to Christianity, and soon gold and silver coinage minted at Aksum bore the Christian cross.

The archaeological remains at Aksum and Gondar speak of the splendor of the ancient kingdom. By the third century CE a series of stone palaces were built at Aksum. The elites also erected a number of monolithic granite stelai which date from the third and fourth centuries, the largest over 95 feet in height. Their outer



surfaces were decorated with such carved architectural details as false doors, inset windows, and timber beams. The stelai served as commemorative markers among the tombs and burial sites of the elite.

The power and influence of the Aksumite state were diminished by the displacement of the Red Sea trade routes after the Persian conquest of south Arabia, and Aksum was conquered by the Zagwe from Ethiopia's western highlands. After Aksum's demise and abandonment, a new capital arose, the influence and prestige of which lasted until near the end of the thirteenth century.

The Zagwe king Lalibela, wishing to create a "new" Jerusalem (the holy city revered by Christians, Jews, and Muslims) in Ethiopia, founded a holy site named after himself in the highlands south of Aksum. The cultural embrace of Christianity by the populace during the thirteenth century is evidenced by the numerous rock-hewn sanctuaries that were created in Lalibela at this time. Rather than being built from the ground up, the churches and other structures were hewn from the living rock. A wide trench was first cut around the four sides of a block of volcanic tuff that would become the church. Stonemasons then carved out the exterior and



14-17 • BET GIORGIS (CHURCH OF ST. GEORGE), LALIBELA
Ethiopia. 13th century. Volcanic rock.

✳️ **Explore** the architectural panoramas of Bet Giorgis on myartslab.com

interior of the sanctuaries with hammers and chisels. Each aspect of the structure had to be planned with precision before work could begin. The interior of the church was created with a hemispherical domed ceiling in the style of the Byzantine churches that Ethiopian priests would have seen during pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

The largest of the 11 churches is **BET GIORGIS (CHURCH OF ST. GEORGE)** which was cut 40 feet down within the rock in the form of a modified cross (**FIG. 14-17**). Most rock-cut sanctuaries have architectural details that appear to have been modeled in part from earlier Aksum palaces. However, Bet Giorgis has window details that are similar to the organic tendril forms found in later Ethiopian painted manuscripts. The origins of the rock-cut church are unknown. The churches at Lalibela may have been modeled on earlier Aksumite cave sanctuaries, but it has also been suggested that they have their origins in central and southern India where Buddhist and Hindu temples, shrines, and monasteries have been excavated from the living rock for over 2,000 years.

KONGO KINGDOM

As in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, art-making traditions in the Kongo cultural region developed over thousands of years.

However, as elsewhere on the African continent, the climate here is often not conducive to the survival of objects made from wood. Among the earliest-known wooden artworks from central Africa is a wood carving unearthed in Angola in 1928 (**FIG. 14-18**). This zoomorphic head may have been created for use as a headdress or mask. Its elongated snout, pointed ears, and geometric surface patterning resemble some masking traditions and sculptural practices that survived in the region well into the twentieth century.

The Portuguese first encountered Kongo culture in 1482 at approximately the same time that contact was made with the royal court of Benin in present-day western Nigeria. They visited the capital of Mbanza Kongo (present-day M'banza Congo) and met the *manikongo* ("king"), who ruled over a kingdom that was remarkable in terms of its complex political organization and artistic sophistication. The kingdom, divided into six provinces, encompassed over 100,000 square miles of present-day northwestern Angola and the western part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 1491, King Nzinga aNkuwa converted to Christianity, as did his son and successor Afonso I, who established Christianity as the state religion. The conversions helped to solidify trade relations with the Portuguese, and trade in copper, salt, ivory, cloth,



14-18 • ZOOMORPHIC HEAD

Angola. c. 750 CE. Wood, 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ " \times 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (50.5 \times 15.5 cm). Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium.



14-20 • CRUCIFIX

Kongo. Early 17th century CE. Bronze, height 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (26.7 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Collection of Ernst Anspach. (1999.295.7)



14-19 • DECORATED TEXTILE

Kongo. Before 1400 CE. Raffia, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " \times 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (24 \times 47 cm). Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, England. (1886.1.254.1)

and, later, slaves brought increased prosperity to the kingdom. Kongo's influence expanded until the mid seventeenth century when its trading routes were taken over by neighboring peoples, including the Lunda and Chokwe.

The increase in wealth brought a corresponding increase in the production of specialty textiles, baskets, and regalia for the nobility. Textiles in central Africa, as elsewhere in Africa, are highly valued and were used as forms of currency before European contact. They figure prominently in funerary rituals even to the present day. Kongo **DECORATED TEXTILES** were lauded by the Portuguese from first contact and were accepted as gifts or collected, eventually finding their way into European museum collections (**FIG. 14-19**).

Following Portuguese contact in the fifteenth century and Nzinga aNkuwa's conversion, Kongolese art increasingly absorbed Western influences. Catholic missionaries brought with them various religious objects, including monstrances (highly decorated vessels used to display the consecrated Eucharistic host) and figures of the Virgin Mary and various saints. The **CRUCIFIX** became especially popular as a potent symbol of both conversion and political authority. Cast in brass and copper alloy, locally produced examples (**FIG. 14-20**) mirror their European prototypes, but are often restated in African terms. The features of the crucified Christ, as

well as his hands and feet and those of the supporting figures, are stylized in ways that suggest local African art, as does the placement of supporting figures above and below the central figure. Although the supporting figures appear to be praying, they are actually clapping their hands—a common central African gesture of respect for another person.

EXPORTING TO THE WEST

Shortly after initial contact with European explorers, merchants, and traders, African artists not only continued to fashion objects for their own consumption but also began to produce them for export to Europe. For example, by the late fifteenth century, carvers residing in present-day Sierra Leone (called Sapi by the Portuguese) and Nigeria (Bini) began to produce ivory objects such as saltcellars, powder flasks, spoons, and forks, as well as exquisitely carved oliphants, or horns (**FIG. 14-21**) for European patrons.

The form of this Sapi-Portuguese oliphant and virtually all its decorative motifs are European-inspired. The mouthpiece is at the narrow end rather than on the side as is typical for African horns. The carvings, including the coat of arms of Portugal and Spain, the motto of Spain's Ferdinand V, and heraldic emblems and hunting scenes, were derived from illustrations found in European prayer books and other publications that were given to the artists as source material. However, not all of the designs found on some export ivories are derived from European sources. For example, some saltcellars depicting human subjects were carved in a style that resembles local stone figures that pre-date Portuguese contact with the west African coast. As we will see in Chapter 29, the synthesis of African traditions and Western influences continued to affect African art in both subtle and overt ways in the modern period.



14-21 • SAPI-PORTUGUESE STYLE HUNTING HORN
Sierra Leone. Late 15th century CE. Ivory, length 25" (63.5 cm).
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC. Gift of Walt Disney World Co., a subsidiary of the Walt
Disney Company (2005–6–9)

THINK ABOUT IT

- 14.1** Analyze the formal characteristics of the human heads in **FIGURES 14-7** and **14-9**. What is the relationship between style and medium, as well as style and function?
- 14.2** What is the spiritual role of the *oba* in Benin? What is his relationship to the spirit world, and how is that relationship represented in one work discussed in the chapter?
- 14.3** Explain the original purpose of the Benin royal plaque (see "A Warrior Chief Pledging Loyalty," page 420). How do the identity and presentation of the individuals on the plaque relate to hierarchy at the royal court and the glorification of Benin kingship?
- 14.4** Evaluate the effect of Portuguese influence on African art by discussing the works in **FIGURES 14-20** and **14-21**. Which aspects of these works derive from local traditions and which are the result of European contact?

CROSSCURRENTS

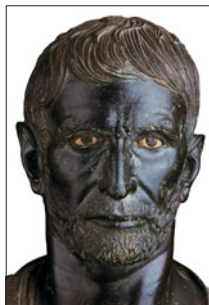


FIG. 6-12



FIG. 14-1

Both of these works in bronze represent important people with heightened descriptive detail that suggests they may portray specific individuals. Discuss the similarities and differences in technique, style, and use. How does each work represent the culture that produced it?

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